

The Builder.

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HOSE who open Mr. Ruskin's new volume, "The Stones of Venice,"* expecting (through its pretty title) to find descriptions and comments on the structures of the sea-girt town, in the brilliant and forcible language of the Oxford Graduate,—the city of poetry and art described by an artist and a poet,—will probably feel disappointed; but we caution them against hastily shutting it, and will promise (however we may differ in various respects with the author) an ample return, in the shape of pleasure and instruction, for any time they may bestow upon its mastery. It is more practical than the writer's previous works, and might be called an essay on the principles of architecture, without reference to Venice, and still there is much beautiful general writing in it too. The author's reason for the course he has adopted will be seen: the good that will follow it will, we have no doubt, be considerable, for "every man has, at some time of his life, personal interest in architecture. He has influence on the design of some public building; or he has to buy, or build, or alter his own house. It signifies less whether the knowledge of other arts be general or not: men may live without buying pictures or statues; but, in architecture, all must in some way commit themselves: they must do mischief, and waste their money, if they do not know how to turn it to account. Churches, and shops, and warehouses, and cottages, and small row, and place, and terrace houses, must be built, and lived in, however joyless or inconvenient. And it is assuredly intended that all of us should have knowledge, and act upon our knowledge, in matters with which we are daily concerned, and not be left to the caprice of architects, or mercy of contractors."

Against Renaissance architecture (as previously against the painters of the Renaissance) he wages war:—"Raised," he says, "at once into all the magnificence of which it was capable by Michelangelo, then taken up by men of real intellect and imagination, such as Scamozzi, Sansovini, Inigo Jones, and Wren, it is impossible to estimate the extent of its influence on the European mind; and that the more, because few persons are concerned with painting, and, of those few, the larger number regard it with slight attention; but all men are concerned with architecture, and have, at some time of their lives, serious business with it. It does not much matter that an individual loses two or three hundred pounds in buying a bad picture, but it is to be regretted that a nation should lose two or three hundred thousand in raising a ridiculous building. Nor is it merely wasted wealth or distempered conception which we have to regret in this Renaissance architecture; but we shall find in it partly the root, partly the expression, of certain dominant evils of modern times—over sophistication and ignorant classicism; the one destroying the healthfulness of general society,

the other rendering our schools and universities useless to a large number of men who pass through them."

It is in Venice, and Venice only, he considers, that effectual blows can be struck at the "pestilent art of the Renaissance," and thinking that, if he can destroy its claims to admiration there, it can assert them no where else; this destruction (in which we do not sympathise with him) is, he states, the final purpose of his essay. To the failings and weaknesses of cinquecento art we are fully alive: to mark these out, to purify and reform, would seem to us a more worthy purpose than to destroy. What we would now do, however, is to point out the motives which have guided the author, and the course he has pursued. Feeling satisfied that there was a right and wrong in architecture, and that good architecture might be indisputably discerned and divided from the bad, he set himself to discover for himself the law that regulates this, and found the work simpler than he had expected. He then felt that he had the choice with respect to this Venetian architecture, either to establish each division of the law in a separate form, as the features arose with which it was concerned, or else to follow out the general inquiry first, and determine a code of right and wrong, to which he might make retrospective appeal. In the volume before us, our author has but arranged his "foundations" of criticism, and he enters Venice in the last paragraph of the book:—

"If I should succeed (he says), as I hope, in making the Stones of Venice touchstones, and detecting, by the mouldering of her marble, poison more subtle than ever was betrayed by the rending of her crystal; and if thus I am enabled to show the baseness of the schools of architecture and nearly every other art, which have for three centuries been predominant in Europe, I believe the result of the inquiry may be serviceable for proof of a more vital truth than any at which I have hitherto hinted. For observe: I said the Protestant had despised the arts, and the Rationalist corrupted them. But what has the Romanist done meanwhile? He boasts that it was the papacy which raised the arts: why could it not support them when it was left to its own strength? How came it to yield to the Classicism which was based on infidelity, and to oppose no barrier to innovations, which have reduced the once faithfully conceived imagery of its worship to stage decoration? Shall we not rather find that Romanism, instead of being a promoter of the arts, has never shown itself capable of a single great conception since the separation of Protestantism from its side?"

On this point, the error of supposing that art owes much to the modern Romish Church, he speaks with strong conviction on several occasions, and scoffs at those who are lured into the Romish Church by the glitter of it, blown into a change of religion by the whine of an organ-pipe, stitched into a new creed by gold threads on priests' petticoats.

"I know nothing," he continues, "in the shape of error so dark as this, no imbecility so absolute, no treachery so contemptible. I had hardly believed that it was a thing possible, though vague stories had been told me of the effect, on some minds, of mere scarlet and candles, until I came on a passage in Pugin's 'Remarks on Articles in the Rambler.'"

This passage he gives, and then comments on the writer as an architect in language more vigorous than complimentary, and which will probably secure for him a niche in some future "Contrasts."

Mr. Ruskin commences the task of determining some law of right to be applied to

buildings, by a chapter on the virtues of architecture, wherein he rightly dwells on the ungrateful coldness shown towards the good "builders of old time," to whom we owe so much, but whose names are never asked, and he points out the distinction (unrecognised by thousands) between the hands that raised the work and the mind that devised it.

"Suppose, for instance, we are present at the building of a bridge: the bricklayers or masons have had their centering erected for them, and that centering was put together by a carpenter, who had the line of its curve traced for him by the architect: the masons are dexterously handling and fitting their bricks, or, by the help of machinery, carefully adjusting stones which are numbered for their places. There is probably in their quickness of eye and readiness of hand something admirable; but this is not what I ask the reader to admire: not the carpentering, nor the brick-laying, nor anything that he can presently see and understand, but the choice of the curve, and the shaping of the numbered stones, and the appointment of that number: there were many things to be known and thought upon before these were decided. The man who chose the curve and numbered the stones, had to know the times and tides of the river, and the strength of its floods, and the height and flow of them, and the soil of the banks, and the endurance of it, and the weight of the stones he had to build with, and the kind of traffic that day by day would be carried on over his bridge,—all this specially, and all the great general laws of force and weight, and their working; and in the choice of the curve and numbering of stones are expressed not only his knowledge of these, but such ingenuity and firmness as he had, in applying special means to overcome the special difficulties about his bridge. There is no saying how much wit, how much depth of thought, how much fancy, presence of mind, courage, and fixed resolution, there may have gone to the placing of a single stone of it. This is what we have to admire,—this grand power and heart of man in the thing; not his technical or empirical way of holding the trowel and laying mortar."

Our author, however, would have done more to make the distinction clear to his readers (and there is much rests upon it), had he not used indifferently the terms "builder" and "architect." He to whom the building is owing,—who devised the arrangement, calculated the forces operating, disposed the materials in the best way to resist these, and scattered over the whole beauty to delight, is (rightly considered) *the builder*; but the common acceptance of the word is different; and although people are too apt to consider "designing" means "building," they never fancy that "building" means "designing."

The ignorance which prevails as to the architect's actual province is very extraordinary. A few weeks ago, for example, we heard an eminent barrister at a dinner-table gravely showing, as an instance of the way in which architects "make their money," how the architect of the New Lincoln's-inn Hall had pocketted a large sum, through his contract for the building including payment for carting away a mass of earth, and his contract for the improvement of the square including payment for obtaining a similar quantity to raise the level. It took some time to show him that the architect had nothing more to do with the contracts, beyond seeing them properly carried out, than he had: and this same misconception prevails to a great extent. The mental power, knowledge, and skill necessary for the production of a worthy building, are for the most part wholly unrecognised.

We cannot attempt now to follow Mr. Ruskin in his analytical chapters, requiring, as they do

* The Stones of Venice. Vol. I. The Foundations. By John Ruskin, author of the "Seven Lamps of Architecture." London: Smith, Elder, and Co. 1851.